

## Major Tenets of Transcendentalism

**Nature = God:** We should live close to nature, for it is our greatest teacher. Nature is emblematic, and understanding its "language" and "lessons" can bring us closer to God. In fact, Nature = God. The words Nature, God, Universe, Over-Soul, etc. all mean the same thing. This is what Hindus believe. They call it Brahma. Brahma, or God, is everything, but nothing in particular.

**God is omnipresent:** God is everywhere and in everything, so there is no need for specific religions or churches. The Transcendentalists did not believe in organized religion because they wanted that direct relationship with God, not one through a pastor or a priest. They thought organized religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.) were all just made up by people anyway.

**Man is divine:** Since Nature is divine, and we are literally creatures of Nature, we are also divine. Therefore, we have a direct relationship with God. In a sense, we are God or particles of God.

**Intuition:** Since God is within us, every person "intuition," an essential understanding of right and wrong (morality). We don't need to learn morality from so-called holy books, laws, or society.

**Self-Reliance:** Our intuition and natural instincts guide us to do the right things. In nature, we are uncorrupted. It is only when we let society influence us that we start to conform and hence, be corrupted.

**Society is the source of corruption:** We are born pure, but society misguides us and corrupts us as we grow old. Society demands conformity, and conformity kills individuality. If we are all to follow our own free will and listen to our intuition, we would be much better off. We don't need artificial laws, customs, fashions, or values.

**Idealism:** Human beings are naturally good at their core. Again, it is society that corrupts us. Human beings left to their own devices are good.

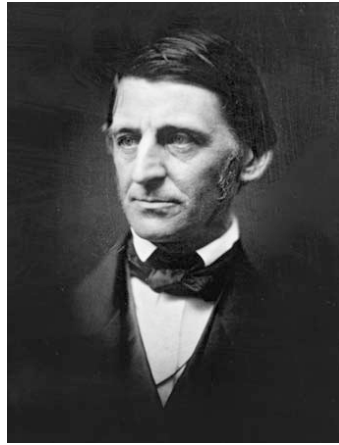
**Materialism is bad:** Striving for material goods is worthless and an unhealthy pursuit. It is totally superficial. Money is evil because it causes us to place artificial and false value on objects and people.

**Technology is bad:** Advances in technology only caused more problems for society. For example, we built the railroad so we could go, go, go. First of all, we should stay home and get in touch with ourselves. Secondly, now we need people to build the track and make the cars and drive the train and maintain everything. Technology ends up running us and not the other way around.

**Emphasis on the here and now:** The past is unimportant. Knowledge comes from experience. It is not derived from studying the past. We can't learn anything truly valuable from the past or from the people who lived before us. Their knowledge was based on their experience, and ours should be too. We should not worship anybody or anything that has come before us.

## Famous Transcendentalist Writers:

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882):



Ralph Waldo Emerson is truly the center of the American transcendental movement, setting out most of its ideas and values in a little book, *Nature*, published in 1836, that represented at least ten years of intense study in philosophy, religion, and literature. Born in 1803 to a conservative Unitarian minister, from a long line of ministers, and a quietly devout mother, Waldo--who dropped the "Ralph" in college--was a middle son of whom relatively little was expected. His father died when he was eight, the first of many premature deaths which would shape his life--all three brothers, his first wife at 20, and his older son at 5. Perhaps the most powerful personal influence on him for years was his intellectual, eccentric, and death-obsessed Puritanical aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. Yet Emerson often confessed to an innate optimism, even occasional "silliness."

His undergraduate career at Harvard was not illustrious, and his studies at the Harvard Divinity School were truncated by vision problems, but he was ordained a minister of the Second Church in Boston, shortly before marrying Ellen Tucker in 1829. He resigned in 1832 after her death from tuberculosis, troubled by theological doctrines such as the Lord's Supper, and traveled extensively in Europe, returning to begin a career of lecturing. In 1835 he married Lydia Jackson; they lived in Concord and had four children while he settled into his life of conversations, reading and writing, and lecturing, which furnished a comfortable income.

Through a career of 40 years, he gave about 1500 public lectures, traveling as far as California and Canada but generally staying in Massachusetts. His audiences were captivated by his speaking style, even if they didn't always follow the subtleties of his arguments. He is one of the most prolific and quoted people in American history. Aside from his book entitled *Nature*, he is also famous for writing the inspirational essay, *Self-Reliance*.

## Henry David Thoreau (1817-1867):



Henry David Thoreau was a complex man of many talents who worked hard to shape his craft and his life, seeing little difference between them. Born in 1817, one of his first memories was of staying awake at night "looking through the stars to see if I could see God behind them." One might say he never stopped looking into nature for ultimate Truth.

Henry grew up very close to his older brother, John, who taught school to help pay for Henry's tuition at Harvard. While there, Henry read a small book by his Concord neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, and was profoundly inspired by it. He spent much of his life exploring its ideas. He and his brother taught school for a while, but in 1842, John cut himself while shaving and died of lockjaw in his brother's arms, an untimely death which traumatized the 25 year old Henry. He worked for several years as a surveyor and making pencils with his father, but at the age of 28 in 1845, wanting to write his first book, he went to Walden pond and built his cabin on land owned by Emerson.

Thoreau lived in the woods for two years and two months and did an incredible amount of reading and writing, yet he also spent much time "sauntering" in nature. He recorded much of his thoughts in his famous book, *Walden*. After returning to Concord, he gave lectures about his experience and was imprisoned briefly for not paying his poll tax because he knew the tax money would be used to fund the Mexican-American War. While in jail, he wrote his famous essay, *Resistance to Civil Government*, aka *Civil Disobedience*.

Over the years, Thoreau's reputation has been strong, although he is often cast into roles -- the hermit in the wilderness, the prophet of passive resistance, etc., he strongly inspired Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and countless others. His work is so rich, and so full of the complex contradictions that he explored, that his readers keep reshaping his image to fit their own needs. Perhaps he would have appreciated that, for he seems to have wanted most to use words to force his readers to rethink their own lives creatively, different though they may be, even as he spent his life rethinking his, always asking questions, always looking to nature for greater intensity and meaning for his life.